

# Uneven Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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I feel uncomfortable to give a theoretical presentation, just after several presentations on concrete issues of specific regions and areas. This feeling stems from my knowledge that naive application of general theory to some concrete conflict or struggle might sometimes give rise to the worsening or deepening of it. Besides, our global age since the 1980s is characterized by increasing application of neoliberalism without taking the complexity of reality in consideration, by the package-typed policies all over the world, first under the name of structural arrangement and then of less forcing nuance of globalization. In fact, neoliberalism with the tendency toward financialization has increased the homogeneity of global capitalism, pulling the developments of many regions in the world into one direction, while increasing inequality and differentiation of wealth, to a considerable extent. This tendency has generally been dominating our global world until today, even there were some counter-movements.

## 1.

In my presentation, I introduce the concept of uneven development, proposed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for thinking of the relation among land, space and modernity in a general perspective. This concept has been important in connecting the problems of land and geography with the idea of imperialism and colonialism. I emphasize that we could revive its importance as a conceptual devise in placing it in the context of neoliberalism of financialization. I mainly rely on a book by Neil Smith of the same title<sup>1</sup>, a new 'classical' book to survey this concept and to investigate its meaning. I take his definition of uneven development, '(u)neven development is social inequality blazoned into the geographical landscape, and it is simultaneously the exploitation of that geographical unevenness for certain socially determined ends' (Smith 1984/ 2007, p. 206).

By the way, this book of Neil Smith was published in 1984, followed by the revised 2<sup>nd</sup> (in 1990) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (in 2007) editions with long postscripts on the contemporary issues respectively. But it still lacks a fundamental perspective for the relation between financialization and uneven development. Here a book by Giovanni Arrighi, "Adam Smith in Beijing" (2007)<sup>2</sup> can be supplementary. Arrighi had been one of the

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1 Neil Smith (1954 -2012): American geographer. After getting his doctor degree at John Hopkins University with the theme of uneven development, he taught at Pennsylvania University, Columbia University, The City University of New York etc.. He also wrote, *American Empire: Roosevelt's geographer and the prelude to globalization* (2003), and *The end-game of globalization* (2005), etc.

2 Giovanni Arrighi (1937- 2009): Economist and sociologist, born in Italy and immigrated in America. At the later part of his life, he collaborated with D. Harvey, the supervisor of Neil Smith's doctoral dissertation. In the Japanese translation

contributors to the theoretical construction of world systems theory since 1970s, together with Wallerstein, Frank and Amin, but especially in paying more attention to the factor of money and finance than others. Besides, this book showed some of his response to the critic that the world systems theory was schematic and simplistic ignoring the difference of periphery areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America<sup>3</sup>. As the title showed, it focused on the form and path of peculiar development of Asia (China and partly India), and its role in the world system. Arrighi wrote it as the sequel of his analysis of American hegemony deployed in his previous book, “The Long Twentieth Century”. But having said that, I would like to emphasize the potentiality of the concept of uneven development for the analysis of land problem here.

## 2.

Following Smith’s analysis, I make an overview of this concept as a theoretical devise, its place in the global history and history of theory, its range of application, and the key factor of its dynamism. It is a concept to question politically and economically the role of geographical structure of some place in the development of capitalism. Seen historically, it was Lenin on imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century and then Trotsky on permanent revolution, who had critically examined this concept in a political perspective. But Smith took a distance to these contributions and, going back to the works of geographers and of Marx himself, made a theoretical survey of the relation between human beings and nature or environment. He set this as the foundation for analyzing “the production and reproduction of space” (a term by H. Lefebvre). In so doing, Smith paid attention to the material dimension of global capitalism which brought both the equalization and differentiation of space in the sense of productions and reproductions of infrastructure that determined the landscape, which were the result of transformation, move, circulation of materials related to the construction by the will of those whom owned or habited around the place. And these activities caused problems and conflicts in the community or in the society.

Smith took highly of the contribution of world systems theory because it emphasized the structural heterogeneity of space in the world with the subjugation of periphery and semi-periphery to the hegemonic center. He saw it as the complement to the conception of uneven development<sup>4</sup>. But at the same time, his critic of world systems theory also deserves attention, that this theory focused only on the scale of global space (*Ibid.*, pp. 6–7), though there were several ranges of scale to apply to the concept of uneven development. These are city scale, the scale of nation–state, and global scale in the concrete appearance of unevenness as a result of capitalistic development (*Ibid.*, p.181). Especially, it is to be noticed that the scale of nation–state is not the only one justified for the crucial decision–making, even though it occupies a special place and role in land problems, exercising its sovereignty in the land reform or land expropriation, often determining the territory with the reasons of economic policy, public welfare or arrangement of sanity, etc..

Besides, as to the dynamism of development, it is the rent for some land that often gives stimulus and motivation for development of space. Smith discussed the theory of rent gap, which ascribed gentrifi-

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of “Adam Smith in Beijing, which I (Nakayama) had translated with several people, we included the last long interview to Arrighi by Harvey. His other works include, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (1994) etc..

3 This critic was originally directed by Amin to Frank. Arrighi took over the reply (Cf. Nakayama 2015, pp.58-59).

4 In more detail, Smith especially consulted a book by Amin, “unequal development” published in 1976 (Smith 1984/2008, p.151).

cation to the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use (*Ibid.*, p. 200, Smith 1996, p.67. Tomotsune 2017 (in Japanese), pp. 99–101). This indicates that the increase of importance of the concept of rent, contrary to the diagnosis of economic theories both of Marxism and of equilibrium that the category of rent would decrease in the meaning and eventually vanish in the future. But we also have to notice that the rent in our age of global capitalism is not determined by Ricardo's differential rent measured by the distance of concentric circle, but rather by unevenly distributed hotspots of mineral or other resources, which would become objects for license and intellectual property rights.

It is without saying that the rent becomes mostly important in relation to financial commodities and that land has to be counted among such commodities, where rent means the reward to let someone utilize some enclosed 'common'. Further, we have to notice that this rent may become negative in the phase of crisis of bursting bubble. As Neil Smith indicated, we might have to think of uneven decline (*Ibid.*, p. 208) instead of uneven development.

### 3.

As to financialization, Arrighi discussed the cycles of accumulation of capital with the transition of hegemonic centers for hundreds of years: According to him, a new hegemonic center emerged as such getting the assistance by some old financial capital and extending its domination in the global scale of uneven development, but it fell into the signal crisis at some point. Then, the center attempted to keep its hegemonic power by shifting its role into the center of financial capital. But this helped the potential next hegemony to appear in front, which resulted in the terminal crisis of the old hegemonic center. Arrighi discussed that this (West-centered) cycle reached its limit after several cycles, when the American hegemonic power had been failed to function as the financial center in the neoliberal period and China gradually appeared as the main actor from the Asian periphery.

On one hand, we can directly combine this analysis with the theoretical frame of uneven development, but on the other hand, it has gradually been clarified that the British hegemony or more exactly, the hegemonic power of the City in London has been maintained with good relationship to its tax havens all over the world in the middle of American hegemony in the neoliberal period. It was certainly a way of continuation of old regime of colonization, but it also served for the strategies of development and growth of periphery to become a new global city. We have to rethink of uneven development in such a perspective of global scale as well as city scale of space.<sup>5</sup>

China itself has also utilized Hong Kong as its financial center in relation to British hegemony, which is in no contradiction with Chinese vision of material development, 'One Belt, One Road (OBOR)' which has extended its range far into Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In analyzing such a situation, we need to combine the three scales Smith had indicated. Certainly "Adam Smith in Beijing" focused on the analysis of China as the main actor in the world system<sup>6</sup>, but it has to be complemented by the analysis of

5 Further we are gradually obliged to notice that so-called virtual currencies like Bitcoin, which do not need any physical space in the world and are free even from tax haven, have come to occupy a certain place in financial markets since 2017. We have been getting desperate measures of many countries, such as the sudden close of exchange of virtual currencies in China, a failure of such close in Korea, a counter-measure of North Korea to rely on virtual currencies against the economic sanctions, etc..

6 It attempted to include the analysis of the 'Orient' or the East in the sense of East Asian and South-East Asian countries,

social formations and cultural aspects of sustaining the domination. These issues are important because the appearance of Asia in the world system urges us to relativize the Western ideal of universalism and to reconsider the concept of Orientalism by Said<sup>7</sup>, rethinking of global history in the longer run than the modern period of the rise of the West<sup>8</sup>. Uneven development has escaped to become the neutral theory by universalistic actors, but it may also be necessary to keep some distance from the practical motivation to think of the theory only for revolution and for social movement seeking for it.

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which were not in the sight of world systems theory until the beginning of 1990s.

7 Frank explicitly stated that he wrote his book, “RE-Orient”, taking Said’s concept of orientalism in consideration.

8 Arrighi took over the problem-setting of Frank in “Adam Smith in Beijing” in his analysis of British hegemony in the perspective of India and made comparison with American hegemony (Nakayama 2015, p. 59). Besides, Arrighi emphasized Frank’s contribution in connection to Pomeranz’ “The Great Divergence” as global history shown as the analysis of global space, in contrast to that of Marxism to focus on factory and class struggle.